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The Empath VR App: Finding Meaning and Connection in our Differences

Empathy is a tool that people do not necessarily realize they need, but developing it makes life more equitable, navigable, and interesting. We thus determined that our user would be an individual that may find themselves in a situation where they feel misunderstood, or where they are having trouble understanding another. However, we feel that empathy should be practiced whether or not an individual faces an active issue surrounding it. We wanted to explore topics surrounding empathy, but before we did anything, we realized that our user was actually everyone. Empathy is something that can always be improved upon, as one can never fully understand what it is like to be in the shoes of another person. This meant that we had to be very cognizant of every kind of individual, and what empathy meant to diverse perspectives. This led to a lot of research around the definition and the spread of empathy, and that process was thus, wait for it, empathetic.

Our group recognizes the great impact that cultivating empathy in everyone can have on our world, and wanted thus to design a method for portraying diverse experiences and allowing people to explore these experiences. An ultimate goal of ours was to uncover common experiences amongst the most seemingly different individuals in order to refute prejudice, discrimination, and bigotry, and make the world a more unified, thoughtful, and understanding place.

We wanted to practice empathy ourselves throughout the process. We thus collected feedback from others within the CA community in order to reveal diverse perspectives surrounding empathy. We hoped to gather this information as a starting point for designing our method of empathy development, as it had to resonate with different people's definition of empathy and their experiences of being misunderstood or marginalized in order for it to be successfully implemented.

Empathy is a word that is thrown around a lot, but it certainly means different things to different people. Although this could prove to be challenging for the nature of our project, it proved to be a good thing that we used to our advantage. We decided to send out a survey to the entire school, and we knew that those who had strong opinions about the subject of empathy would respond. By doing this, we would be able to get better access to our user, as only those who are misunderstood would feel the need to respond to this. These individuals had conflicting for how they defined empathy, as one subject said, "Relating to others." and another subject mentioned, "The ability to feel and/or understand the feelings of another." The idea of feeling another's feelings was something we attach ourselves to, as there were no limits to how we might do this. We commonly think of this idea as something impossible, but we wanted to push the limit on how impossible that might have been.

Point of View Statements

1. People in our country and outside of it need bonding in a time of geopolitical struggle.
2. In America, we need more intergenerational empathy.
3. Empathy helps individuals realize problems outside their own.

4. More empathy helps others see the similarities between problems they have with another, even if their circumstances are almost completely different.
5. We need empathy to help overcome assumptions about others.

For our HMW questions, we took from a UC Berkeley article titled: “Six Habits of Empathetic People”. We decided to use these, as there is no better thing to tool for discovering ideas centered around identity than habits of the very feeling we are trying to instill into everyone.

How Might We Questions

1. Final HMW: How might we try another person’s life?
2. Challenge prejudices and discover commonalities
3. How might we approach something new with curiosity instead of judgment?
4. How might we find a way to Listen hard—and open up

We decided to move forward with trying out another person’s life as our guiding HMW question. We felt this combined many ideas of empathy into one, as trying on another person’s life requires looking outside of one’s own issues, looking past the way in which one was raised, and realizing completely the world of another. Even though we did not end up choosing all of them, we used all of our POV questions and HMWs as guiding principals throughout our project, and most of what we did reflected them.

The research we conducted centered around possible methods of cultivating empathy, as although we knew we wanted to do this, we did not have a set idea on the method we wanted to utilize for our project. We thus sought out qualities or mindsets that are important in developing empathy. Through our research, we learnt of the importance of active listening in developing empathy, so we resolved to create a platform where many different perspectives are not only expected to share their own experiences, but are also expected to listen to others’. Through this active listening, we are hoping that people will discover shared aspects of their identities, as although they may have different perspectives, there is always a way to discover common experiences or traits.

We also learnt of the impact of humanizing foreign experiences in order to make them more palpable, which pushed us to design a platform with real individuals that share their authentic experiences. We are hoping that this will put a human face to unfamiliar experiences, and unite people over their shared humanity. Another quality we wanted our design to portray was that of eliciting altruism by continually stressing shared experiences to maintain connectedness, and a sense of belonging with and responsibility to individuals across the entire world. This made clear that a platform where people can not only share their experiences, but also actively discuss and reflect upon others’ experiences was necessary for our goal. For this, we want our platform to teach individuals how to step away from their own personal experience to explore others’, and ultimately learn about their own perspective throughout the process, and to do so through interactive discussion, questioning, and experiencing. We wanted our design to encourage people to practicing switching perspectives, and thus resolved to create a shifting perspective generator, which would oblige people to continually change perspectives, and practice active empathy. An important element our design revolves around is that of refraining from judgment, as we believe that judgement interferes with one’s ability to accurately grasp where an individual is coming from. We are thus hoping to build on pre-existing human instincts for

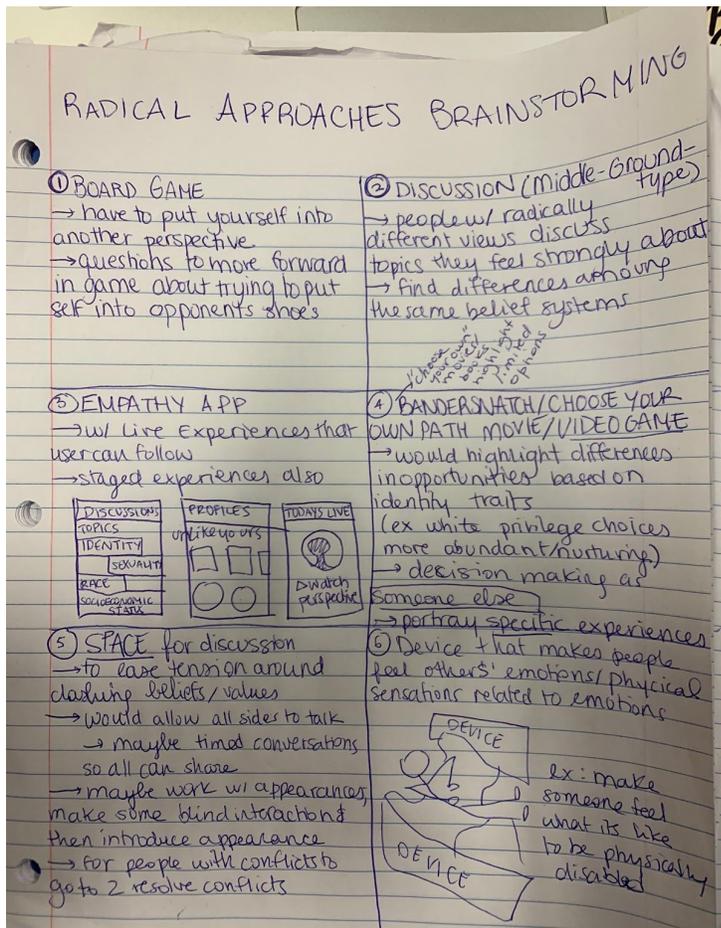
empathy, in order to overcome prejudice and judgement as a defense mechanism for facing the unknown.

We further discovered that playing games permits people to actively explore another's perspective, as games inspire people to trace others thought process in order to try and determine their actions. This prompted us to include activities that build emotional understanding while including some competition in order to practice perspective flexibility. We want the game aspect of our design to reveal how much one does– or doesn't know or understand about other's perspective. Another essential way to discover similarities among our identities is to establish cultural connections, such as through music. Through music, people can find similarities in how they experience and process emotions. Exploring each others' emotional spheres and ways for coping with strong emotion is another way for our users to connect.

Our group decided to conduct some research before brainstorming possible designs, as we immediately recognized that we could take the project in many different directions. Therefore, conducting some preliminary research permitted us be on the same page about the impact we wanted our design to have on our users and the values we wanted to promote.

We began brainstorming possible solutions individually based on the survey responses collected. Individual brainstorming proved to be very helpful as we ended up having radically different approaches to the challenge. After working through our individual ideas, we shared them as a group. Our different approaches to the issue allowed us to compile all our diverse ideas into more relevant, interactive designs. We finally decided that we wanted to include interaction, where people can discuss their experiences, as well as a way to visually portray specific experiences for people to feel another's perspective and learn what it's like to live another's life.

Compilation of Main Radical Brainstorming Ideas

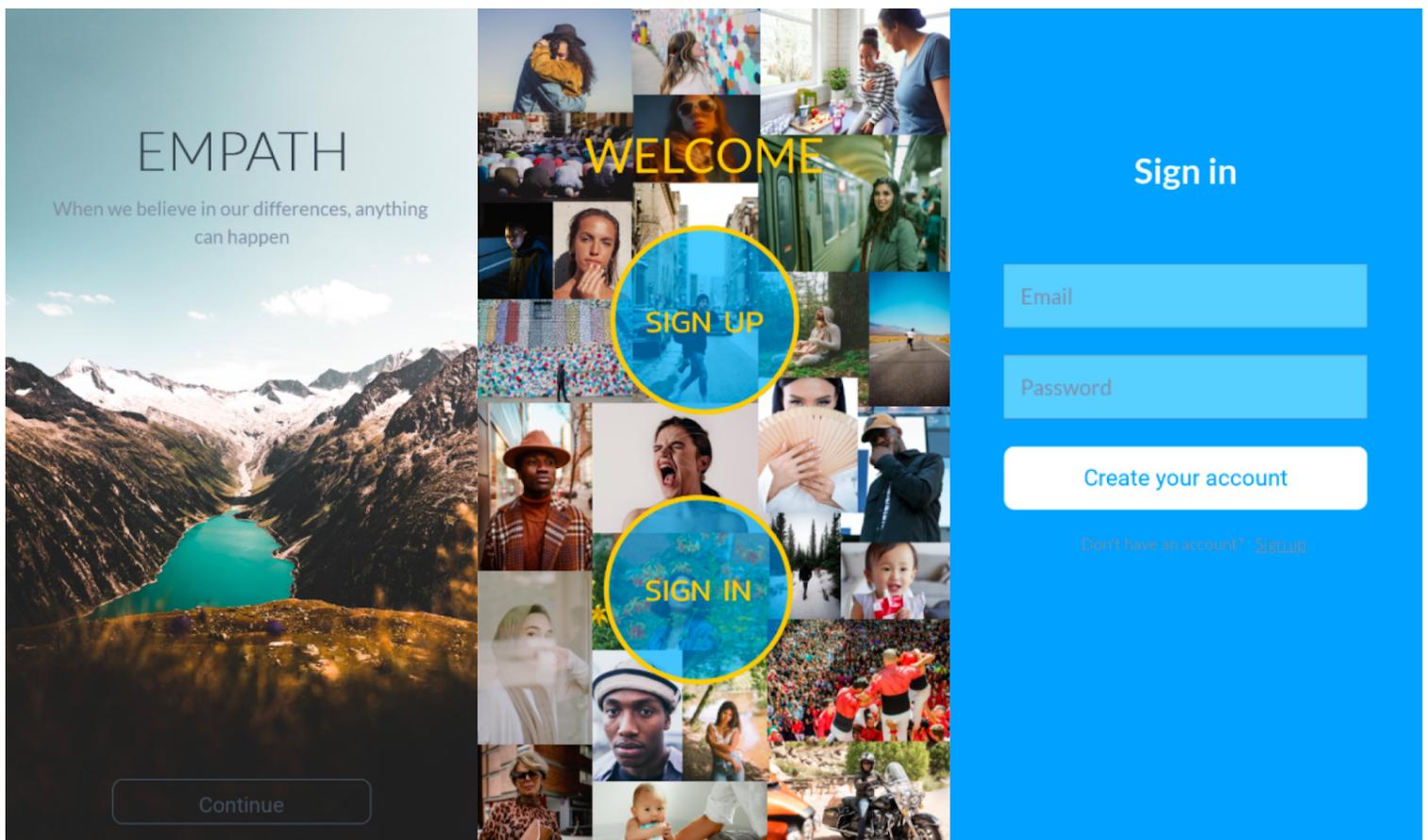


Main Ideas Generated:

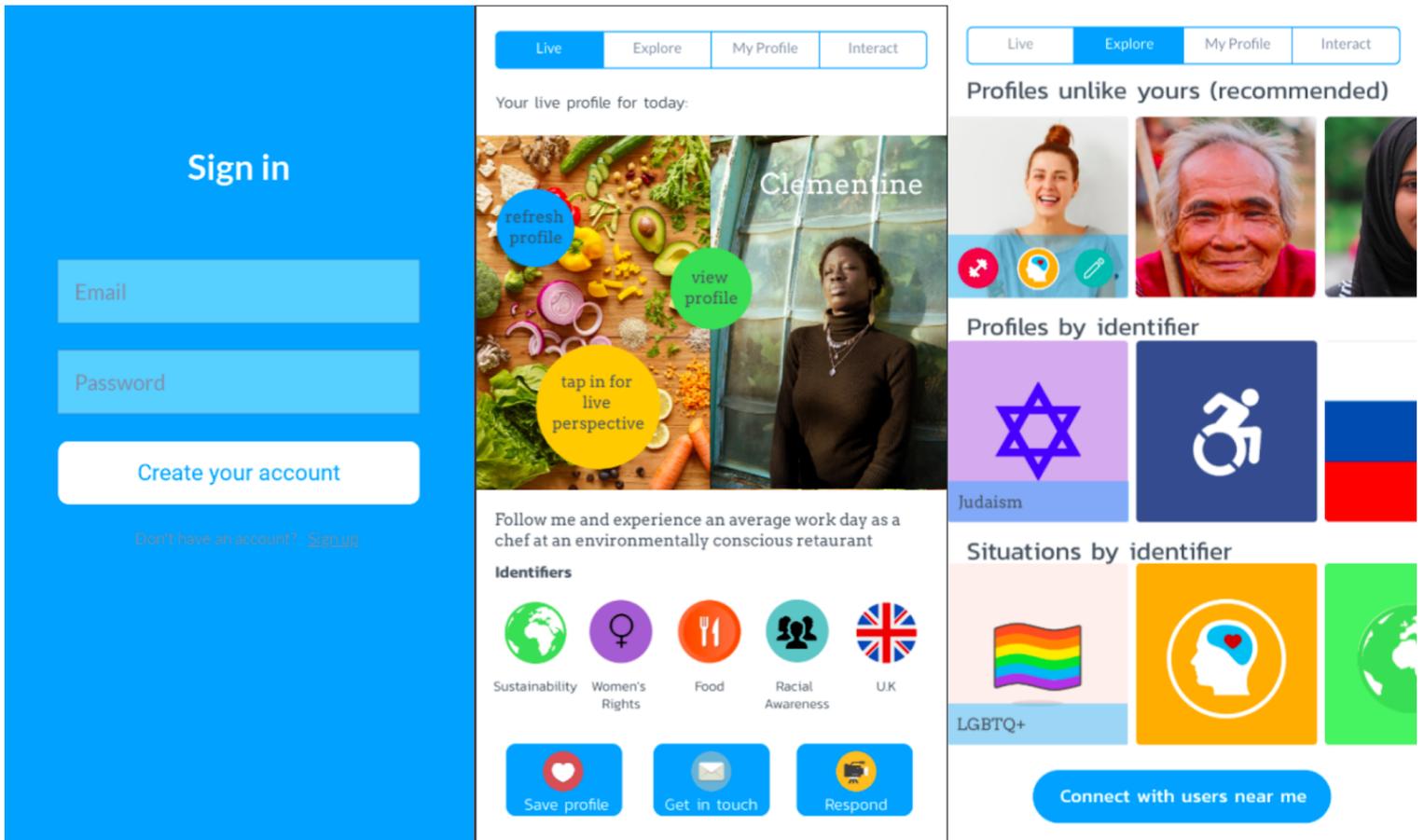
1. Board game
2. Discussion (middle-ground type)
3. Empathy app
4. Choose your own path video game or movie
5. Safe, interactive discussion space
6. Device that makes people feel others' emotions/ physical sensations

Out of all our ideas generated, we selected that of an empathy app as we wanted our design to be accessible to many perspectives. Although we liked the idea of a board game, we recognized that people would probably play it with like-minded individuals that come from similar backgrounds. We decided not to go with the discussion idea as we wanted our design to be a platform for consistent interaction, as we believe that empathy should be regularly practiced. Finally, we realized that we could include most of our ideas in the app. For example, we decided to include an empathy-boosting game section and a cultural connection section, where people of different backgrounds can connect through music and other forms of entertainment.

Prototyping:



We wanted to create a very vibrant and welcoming opening page for our app. After getting feedback from friends and family around what engages them, we decided that dynamic photos and bright yet soothing colors would provide this setting.



The “Live” page generates a profile per day that is recommended to the user. These profiles or their specific experience of the day will include different identifiers than the user’s as to match people with diverse points of views.

The “explore” section allows people to browse various profiles and situations. This section is useful if a user is seeking a specific kind of perspective for a specific situation. Users may additionally find profiles near them in order to find diversity and connection among local perspectives.

Live Explore My Profile Interact



Aliza Jenkins

my profile description goes here

Identifiers



LGBTQ+



Women's Rights



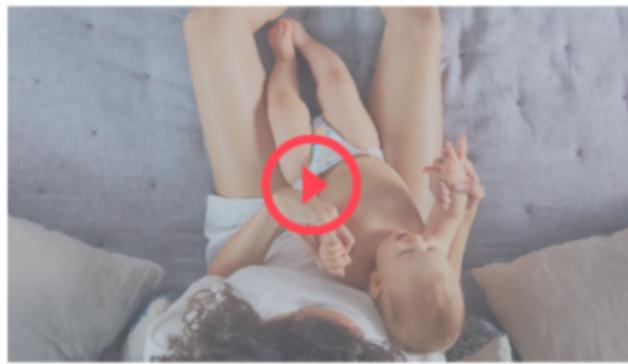
Buddhism



Introversion

Perspectives

Motherhood as a lesbian



Introversion around the holidays



Identifiers are traits that may affect an individual's identity. Users may select identifiers that they feel are relevant to understanding their perspective

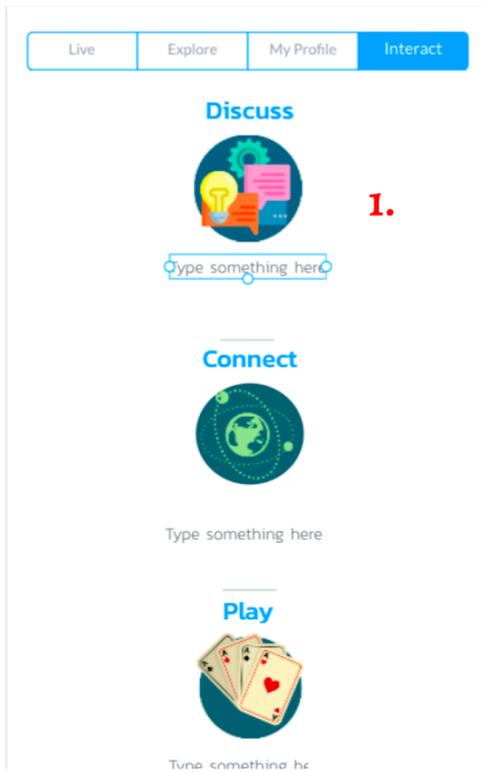
Profiles you follow and regularly interact with

Users can directly message other profiles in order to pose specific questions about their perspective or respond to their content.

Edit your profile

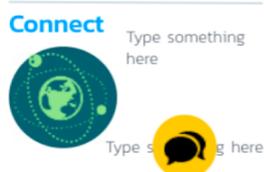
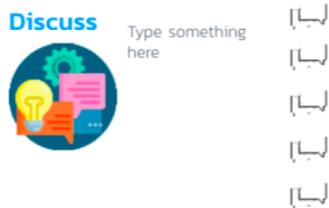
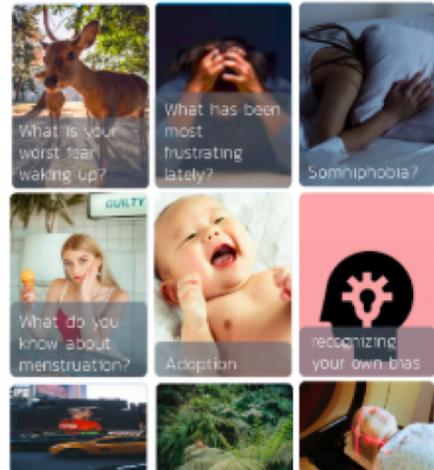
Profile main page

Profile settings



Listen, Share, Build

Suggest a Topic



Find cultural connection,
explore differences



visual art



music



cinema



Practice Mindset Flexibility

Board Games



Exploratory



Puzzles



Illustrated above is some of our prototyping process. The navigability of our app proved to be a challenge as there was a lot we wanted to include. We knew we wanted a section for people to interact, however, thought it may be too complicated to include several modes of interaction. In order to approach this

challenge, we readily collected user feedback during the digital prototyping process in order to ensure that the app was easily accessible.

. Test & evaluate.

i. Collect data regarding your prototype's performance.

ii. Get feedback from your users.

This prototype ran really well with those who looked at it. Subjects said they really enjoyed the general idea of creating a platform where the purpose of it garnering empathy rather than focusing on “likes” or follows. However, one thing that became apparent was that our users were very interested in the live section and what that looked like. While being a very important aspect of our app, we realized that it was hard to understand for those trying to get a sense of our app. So, we decided to do a mock “script” for what a live feed would look like. We decided to use a random teacher who we don't know as the subject of our story, as she had mentioned offhand that she had an ongoing feud with a family member. We went back to her asking for that story, but she instead gave us another story as she felt the previous one was rather complex. The story involved a feud between her brother and law and her mother disagreeing about what Christmas meant to either of them.

Script:

You are standing in the middle of a living room in an argument with your spouse. She keeps trying to get you to go to your mother-in-law's Christmas. You don't want to. You try and explain how as a child often around Christmas you felt very ostracised around the holidays being a child of first generation immigrants from India. You flashback to a childhood of unmet expectations for the holidays, a disappointing lack of tradition, and . You tried to explain how even though you know that this wouldn't be the case at your mother-in-law's you still feel that spending Christmas with a bunch of white people could trigger emotional trauma from when you were young. As you try and explain this to your mother-in-law she just keeps saying that it's about family and that you don't have to feel that way anymore. You try to explain to her how it's not just something that can be moved past in a night. You end in disagreement. Later you're talking to your wife about the issue and she understands where you're coming from. She ultimately poses the choices as yours. She also helps you to understand that Christmas means a lot to her mother and it's the only time in the year that she gets to see all of the family together, and this year is especially important to her and 'us' because of your newborn son. You call your mother-in-law again. This time you both seem much less hostile and willing to negotiate. After hours of deliberation you eventually agree that you can come down just for Christmas Eve and Day and in turn she will hold a much smaller family gathering.

Family first. You are standing in your bedroom after hearing the news your son and law and daughter may not be coming to Christmas. You are enraged. You cannot fathom why someone would want to undermine your number one holiday, especially since it is your first time seeing the new baby. You remember five different things that you have to cook right after you have a second to breathe. How can he do this to you? Christmas is the only time year you can spend some time together, and now it is being taken away from you. You have waited so long to see your newborn grandson, and that moment is being stripped away from you, all because someone had a couple bad Christmases. Coming from a strong family bond, you do not understand why he wouldn't respect your tradition in return. Christmas, to you, has always been more about the family, but he does not seem to see it the same way as you. He lets you know how ignorant you are and points out you're white. You have mostly been surrounded by white people your

whole life. Huh. You have been surrounded by white people you're whole life. Later on, once you have cooled, you call again, apologizing for what you said. Although you still do not fully understand his side, you do not want bad blood, and figure this relationship is worth keeping. After all, family first.

This scenario worked even better, as it combined many different aspects of the problems of empathy we see in generational differences: religion, and failure to acknowledge privilege. In practice, individuals' profiles would be analyzed to see whether they would be placed in the perspective of the mother or the son-in-law based on how different they were from the two. Making sure individuals are in situations outside of themselves is at the essence of what we are trying to do with *Empath*.

c. What issues arose while creating and testing your prototypes?

The issues that arose were in between us, as we had different perceptions of what a live feed looked like. One of us believed a scriptment was literally a live feed of someone else's life, while the other two believed that it would be based on the reality but the situations shown themselves would be produced. We ended up going with the latter, as it gave us more options in terms of setting up a specific message we wanted to portray, and engaged our audience more than if it was just a life feed of someone's day.

Concluding

The best thing about this entire process was that we practiced what we preached, in that the empathy permeated through everything we did. Gathering evidence from our peers was the very first step of our process, and in doing this, we were able to look at empathy not only from our point of view, but from everyone else's. As mentioned earlier, empathy means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, and although we were gathering evidence from universities about empathy, one's actual experience and how they express empathy varies. Our empathy was also present in our design, as we made sure we got diverse users to answer questions about our design. While this may seem like a poor idea, as we did not question the same user who helped us outline what it meant to be empathetic, the strength of our process was using all of the different perspectives to create a universal idea of empathy consisting of a large array of feedback.

Our weakness, which may not seem like one at surface level, caused a great deal of disorganization. We were all exceedingly excited about our topic, as we were all very delighted with the idea of looking at the world through another's eyes in order to try and understand another. This led to us going off on distracting tangents about empathy and getting into deep discussions about what it truly means to be understood. As we spent a lot of time *thinking* and debating, we did not have that much time for the *doing*. This made the prototyping process disorganized and sometimes confusing, as there were points where we were not on the same page about our goal. Because there were a lot of ideas that were flying around, we could not always keep track of which route we were going down; there were times where we had different conceptions of what an idea meant. As previously mentioned, we all had explored these ideas on our own, so when we really got rolling with what our "VR" App would look like, there were different perceptions of what we wanted certain parts of the app to look like and what would contribute more to our overarching themes. Ideas are best when they are spontaneous, and there was a

lot of passion about our design, we just wished it all could have been organized in a more processed and thoughtful manner.

In terms of the final product itself, the idea of empathy also bled into our theoretical technology developed. Our prototype is simple, containing only four main pages, and thus is very easy to navigate. It contains clear sections, and the layout mirrors other popular social media websites like Facebook and Instagram. This is so that many different kinds of people will be able to successfully navigate the app, as it may look familiar to them and because the options are clearly labeled. Getting all generations involved in the app is crucial to our goal, as we recognize to have diversity in age, as a lot of conflict we see in modern society involving a lack of understanding comes from two separate generations (hence our scriptment). Having aspects of Facebook (profile) and Instagram (explorer feed) is crucial, as it illustrates the two generations through their respective social media platforms. Speaking of age, because it was VR, this meant the experience would be available to everyone, including those who were not able to move like they used to. Having a VR experience introduces more senses, allowing the user to experience another's life more authentically, which particularly allows those who have physical or mental disabilities that prohibit them from pursuing certain life experiences. Having a navigable app allows for a wide range of users, something vital to our goal.

But our design is not perfect, and one of the imperfections was what we missed. There were many features that had to be explained outside of our final design, that were not included in our prototype, like the specifics in the user's profile, as well as how the mechanics of the platform worked, including how discussions would be set up, and how we would allow for physical interaction to take place. However, potential problems are more of an issue for us, as it is difficult to foresee what problems the user will have with the app until they actually use it. Of course, we asked our users about the individual aspects of our design, but our design is not something that can be truly experienced like the smoothie group. Two of the potential problems that could occur, but we could not be sure until we had users in the app were the honesty of people in the app, and the users changing the meaning of the app. Honesty is crucial to our design, as our app is based around getting to know another's authentic experience, and if one is not accurately portraying their life, then one of our core values would be undermined. Users may try and fabricate a life, especially if they are able to get a featured "scriptment". More generally, users may use the app besides its intended purpose of developing empathy. When creating what is essentially a social media platform, you are going to have those who use it to devalue others. If this became a alarming factor, we would need to find a way to combat this hate in a way that does not feel like censorship for the users, as we vow to stay empathetic throughout this entire process.

Improvements for the design include making the design more accessible, this time in terms of younger audiences and people in cultures with limited access to technology. Pulling from our board game idea, we could include mini-games on the app that would engage a younger audience and help get their brains to practice empathy from a young age, as well as expose them to different kinds of humans starting early. Part of the research we conducted explored babies and the natural human instinct for empathy, which diminishes as individuals begin developing prejudices as a means to avoid and excuse our world's disparities. So, practicing empathy from a young age, making sure that this instinct remains aflame, could definitely change the world. In terms of cultures, a lot of those displayed in our design do not capture the entire breadth that we are trying to explore, as we are looking to get stories from everyone all over the world, to explore circumstances that are different from one's own self in all areas, which is difficult when many perspectives would not necessarily have access to the app.

While there are certain things that could be tweaked, what is important to highlight in our design is that this concept unites a very positive aspect of life (empathy) with one that is typically vilified (technology). Technology can be used for uniting people rather than tearing people apart, particularly in the area of generational differences. We are now at a time where we are more divided than ever, just as we began to connect with the rest of the world. We use our ability to empathize to make genuine and heartfelt connections and shed light on our world's disparities, and our app seeks to address this.

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